



YOUR LETTERS

MAILBOX

If you've got a problem with your PC, you can always send us a screenshot or a photo and we'll try our best to help you. But please: no more pictures of your grime-encrusted keyboards

★ Video evidence Showing where a problem is



I was thinking back the other day to when we bought our new Ford Focus ST170 from a Ford dealer. It had a few intermittent problems that disappeared every time that the car went back in, only to show up on the way home or a few days later on. Not seeing this evidence, the garage wouldn't give us a replacement car, and repairs couldn't be done as the problems couldn't be found.

I hit upon the idea of videoing the faults as they happened and then took the tape in to show the garage. With this proof the garage had to make the necessary repairs, and the car was fixed.

The point is that if your PC crashes or bleeps intermittently and has trouble booting up, why not do the same and email your manufacturer so the support staff can see the problem for themselves? You'll be more likely to get a solution or replacement product.

Paul Smith

We really like this idea. Computers are so random in the way they work that an intermittent problem can often be an ongoing pain that never gets fixed. With Paul's idea, at least you've got documentary evidence that a problem does exist. This information isn't just useful for getting a refund on a broken product; it's also a good way of helping a technician find out where the problem is so that it can be fixed.

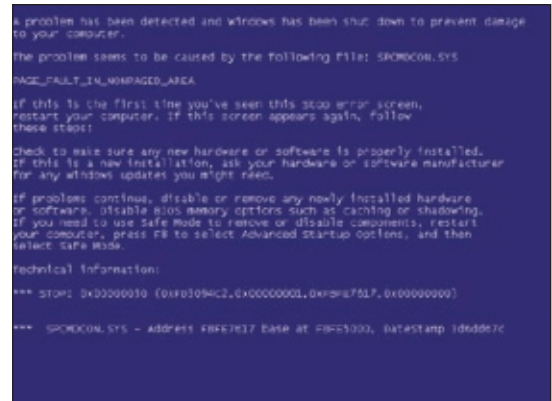
Video shouldn't be the only method you employ, though. If you have problems with software we recommend taking a screenshot of the problem, particularly error messages.

This is easy to do. Just press the Print Screen button on your keyboard (it may also be called Prt Scrn). Load Paint from the Start menu and

press Ctrl+V to paste the screenshot. Save this as a file to your computer, and you can then email it as part of a support request or have it handy for reference. If your computer's completely locked up and you can't take a screenshot, then a quick digital camera or camera-phone shot of the screen will do the job, and at least prove the error.

Remember when you're making a complaint or trying to report an error to include as many details as you can. Always quote the exact error message you're getting for software. Try and include information on what you were doing and what you were running, too.

Don't forget, *Computer Shopper* is here to help, too. Our *Helpfile* section is the best there is, and we can help you get your computer working again. Just include the information about your problem, including screenshots and video, in an email addressed to helpfile@computershopper.co.uk.



▲ Taking a screenshot of any error messages can help support staff – and *Computer Shopper* – sort out your problems

CONTACT US

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WRITE TO US AT

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MAC ATTACK



I discovered the other day that laptops can be an interesting youth deterrent. I work in an IT store that has all the usual kinds of customers, but seems recently to have become a hang-out for three hooded 16-year olds. They take great pleasure in calling anyone who walks around the store a geek or, when they get bored of that, making sounds like a family of cats. We always usher them out of the store, but sometimes when you're working hard and you have a headache you turn around to find them grinning at you.

There is, however, solace. The god of tech must have been listening to our prayers, because one day a small pile of paper collapsed and knocked one of them over. He fell forwards on to an unfortunately placed MacBook and received a painful whack on the chin. We were, of course, all devastated by this.

Dan Brown

Brilliant, but there's one bit of information missing: was the MacBook alright? Has anyone else got a story about a computer fighting back? Perhaps one of you has a printer that fights crime, an external hard disk that foiled a burglary or a monitor that enforces an ASBO. We'd love to know.

THE SPIRIT OF MACBITER LIVES ON

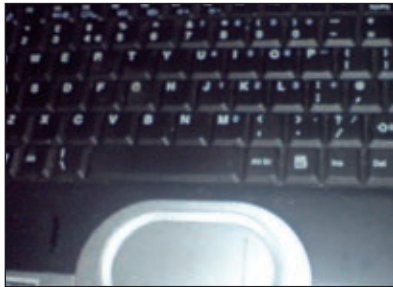


After much consideration, as well as waiting the customary 12 months for due respect since 28th October 2006, I am happy to see the spirit of Tony Tyler (MacBiter) living on in the *Rants & Raves* column. I hereby pronounce it to be excellent stuff and look forward to reading the trials and tribulations each month. But what's happened to Simon Edwards? Only Mel Croucher seems to be writing it now.

You should bring back Edwards, as I have a couple of tiny tweaks. First, you actually mention computers ☺

**Dirty! Cleaning kit winners**

We've been inundated with pictures from readers eager to show just how dirty their keyboards are. These are the final two, and we're sad to say that we're now out of Durable kits, as you lot clearly need them.



▲ Believe me, my laptop is rotten with dirt. I even think that it is a growing place for bacteria and this is why I am having to take days off from my programming lectures – *Phelim Brady*



▲ I am hoping that you still have a cleaning kit left, because the keyboards I use at work are a health hazard – *Paul Burt*

from time to time; keep practising and it'll be down to none at all soon enough. Also, how are you on the keyboards Mel? And Simon needs to start smoking and drinking like a true rock star because he looks too clean-living. Other than that, spot on!

Ian Thompson

We're sure that both Mel and Simon are flattered to be compared to the late, great MacBiter. Tony Tyler would most likely be proud to still have some kind of influence on the magazine, too. Mostly, we're pleased that you still like the section.

Simon's no longer writing *Rants & Raves*, as his new job as Online Editor means he's far too busy trying to get the best news to keep our website up to date. Don't worry, though, he's still walking around the office ranting and raving, so perhaps we should record him and pass the result through some speech-to-text software. We'll let him know your comments, although we're not sure we agree with him looking clean-living.

READ IT AND LEARN

I thought James Morris's article 'Become An Internet TV Star' (*Shopper*, 238) was typical of *Shopper's* output. It was authoritative, informative and comprehensive. Oh yes, and it didn't have too many long words.

I make short cartoon films and have been looking for ways to distribute them. I now have my answers thanks to James's piece. Courtesy of previous issues of *Computer Shopper*, I can understand the workings of encryption, appreciate why there are physical

limits to chip sizes and even the basics of quantum computing. In this fast-changing world, not to keep abreast of the latest developments is to go backwards.

It's for those reasons, plus your neat balance of reviews, advice and How To...s that I've just subscribed to *Computer Shopper* – my first ever magazine subscription.

David Thorpe

We're very pleased that you like the magazine enough to take out a subscription. If you love our advice, reviews and How To... guides now, then you're going to be very pleased with some changes we've got planned. We can't say too much now, but don't worry, we're not going to ruin the excellent balance the magazine already has: we're just going to be introducing more detailed help sections so that you can get the most out of your PC.

NATIONAL EXPRESS

In our internet world, I believe that we need a way to be informed reliably where our money is going. In other words, while your credit card is being validated, a message should show which country your money is heading to.

This way you can shop only in those countries where you feel safe. You may even avoid a situation where your credit card company tells you: "Sorry, that company that you paid money to is in a country without robust anti-fraud laws and the money is now beyond our reach, so we can't give you a refund."

Tom Boyd

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The Editor is always pleased to receive ideas for articles, preferably sent first in outline form, with details of the author's background and, where available, samples of previously published work. We cannot, however, accept responsibility for unsolicited copy and it may take time for us to reply.

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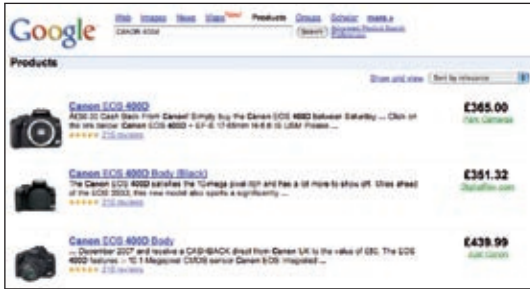
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▲ Google Products' search lets you see how other users have rated the selling companies

Staying safe online is a hot topic, particularly around Christmas, and there are no easy answers. Your suggestion for internet businesses to display their country of origin is practical, but very difficult to enforce. A lot of suspect companies could easily negate this by examining your computer's IP address for its location, and then simply print this information on their sites. To see how easy this is to achieve go to www.melissadata.com/lookups/iplocation.asp and follow the simple onscreen information. As you'll see, not only will this site tell you the country that you're in, but also the city.

There are ways to keep safe online, though. First, try and shop only in businesses that have been ranked highly by other users. Price comparison websites such as Google Products (www.google.co.uk/products) and PriceRunner (www.pricerunner.co.uk) have shop ratings, as rated by other users. This means that not only can you find the cheapest online prices, you can also find the stores that are the most highly recommended by others.

If you want to buy a product that isn't listed using one of these search engines, there are other things that you can try. To find out where a website is registered, go to www.who.is and type the website name into the search box, dropping the leading 'www.'. For example, www.computershopper.co.uk becomes computershopper.co.uk. Click on the information tab to see who registered the domain name and their location. This isn't 100 per cent perfect, as domains can be registered through a third party, but it's a start.

Next, try searching for the website in Google and Google Groups to see if other people have had any problems with the company. Finally, if you don't feel secure buying from a site and you think it looks dodgy, then don't buy from it.

Always pay by credit card, though, as this is your guarantee of protection. In the event that you don't get the goods that you paid for but your card is charged, you're entitled to a refund from your credit card company. Always telephone them first in the event of a problem to get advice.

Finally, if your card is used without your permission to buy goods over the phone or on the internet – called card not present – then you have very little liability for charges incurred and your card company will refund your money. This situation could change, though, with the introduction of services such as Verified By Visa and MasterCard SecureCode. These services will require you to enter an additional password when you buy goods over the internet, in a similar way to Chip and Pin in high street stores.

The potential problem with this is that if your password gets stolen, then you could be liable for the charges incurred. This is similar to the case now with Chip and Pin, where it can be difficult to prove that you're the victim of fraud. Our advice is to ensure that you keep passwords and PINs safe, and never divulge them to anyone; always shop online from sites that you trust; and report any transactions that you haven't authorised as soon as you spot them.

BLOCKS CLEVER



I found your article on eBay tips (*Shopper*, 236) really useful, but I have another rather sneaky one that I have used a couple of times that your readers may find useful. A while ago I was selling some Chinese Enlighten Brick building blocks. These are small plastic bricks that plug together in a similar way to Lego. In fact, the Enlighten Brick blocks will even connect perfectly with Lego bricks.

My first attempt at selling my warship model made out of Enlighten Brick parts got no bids at all, as not many people will search for "Enlighten Brick warship".

Of course, eBay's rules prevented me from changing my auction to say something like "Lego-like" or "Lego compatible", as that contravenes one of the listing rules. At the time the Lego category was very active with around 10,000 items, so the question was, how could I make my Chinese Enlighten Brick model warship noticed?

On examination of the Lego sales going on at the time, I saw that Star Wars and Harry Potter featured a lot, so I decided to use that popularity. Eventually, I decided to use the item title "Bored with Star Wars Lego? Try this warship model" and it worked! I had a few bids and managed to make some money, and I don't think I broke any of eBay's rules. A little thought about how to list your items on eBay can certainly pay off.

Rob Purvis

That's a good tip, and shows that being clever when listing eBay items can make a big difference. As you've pointed out, though, you need to stay within eBay's listing rules, so as not to have your auction cancelled. The general rule to remember is that you have to describe the product that you're selling accurately, and not liken products to big-brand names. The aim is to keep auctions clear, simple and accurate for buyers. Work within that framework, as Rob did, and it's still possible to have your Far-Eastern products generate interest.

BROADBAND RIP-OFF



I wonder in which other fields of business a service provider could get away with conning the public so blatantly. I am of course referring to the great broadband con: "Get 8Mbit broadband and speed up your surfing life" they cry from their ads. You then see the small print which says "up to 8Mbit/s" and all the additional info about being far away from the exchange.

I am currently going through hell with Virgin Media. I have been paying Virgin for 8Mbit/s ADSL broadband for a couple of years. I can't get 8Mbit/s, but I should be getting between 5Mbit/s and 6Mbit/s – I can live with that. However, I can currently get only 450Kbit/s on a good day and as slow as 200Kbit/s on some days.

I have tried to resolve this with Virgin Media, but it tells me to test the line with BT's Speedtester, which when compared to Myspeed and Speedtest.net is wildly optimistic. Virgin Media has said it will investigate the problem only if this test reports speeds of less than 400Kbit/s.

I finally managed to speak to someone in the technical support department. He admitted that no-one gets 8Mbit/s and Virgin knows that. However, because other ISPs advertise up to 8Mbit/s, they have to as well. Is this not contrary to the Sale of Goods Act or the Trade Descriptions Act? Perhaps in other walks of life, but obviously not in the wonderful world of the web.

Colin Partington ☺

WRITE IN AND WIN!

If you want to make the most out of your home movies and photographs, then Adobe's Photoshop Elements 6 and Premiere Elements 4 are the best and easiest way to do so. If you fancy getting your hands on these products, there's no need to put your hand in your pocket; all you have to do is write a great letter. Get it printed as our Star Letter, and a copy of both applications will be winging its way to you in the post.

Photoshop Elements 6 is the best home photo-editing application. Its powerful features are taken from the full Photoshop application, so you can get the same results, but Elements is a lot easier to use. Premiere Elements 4 does a similar job for movie making, pulling its features from the high-end Premiere software, but making it all easier to use so you'll be able to produce Hollywood-style movies from the comfort of your home.



PLUS!

Every published letter-writer who provides their address also receives a *Computer Shopper* mug





Advertised broadband speeds are a huge bone of contention for any users. Currently, it's perfectly legal for ISPs to advertise broadband packages as offering services of 'up to' a certain speed. This is similar in many ways to the fact that wireless router manufacturers can advertise speeds of 300Mbit/s, when actually this is a theoretical limit.

The big problem with broadband speeds, though, is that there are many limiting factors that can cause problems. For starters, your physical distance from the exchange plays a massive part in the speed you can get. The closer you are, the better throughputs you'll get.

Even then, though, being on top of an exchange is no guarantee of quality. We spoke to someone who works at an ISP who said that even with test kit sitting directly in the exchange the most they could get out of a 24Mbit/s broadband supply was 19Mbit/s.

There are other factors to consider, too. The quality of the copper cable that runs from your house to the exchange plays a huge part. If you've got poor-quality cabling, then you'll see reduced speeds. The contention rate in the exchange can also make a big impact. If you live in a congested area with many people using broadband, you'll find that your speed is reduced.

There's also the problem of your ISP's network being busy. All ISPs have to pay for the bandwidth that they use to connect to the internet. If they've got a slow connection, or it's getting flooded by people doing hefty downloads, you'll find that your effective speed drops. Finally, testing across the internet is always going to be limited by the server to which you're connecting. If lots of other people are

accessing the same server at the same time, you'll get slower download rates.

All these factors combined make it difficult to place a true figure on any advertising claims, but the situation could be improved. If ISPs were forced to print an 'average' connection speed, then at least that would give a more realistic impression of what you should expect.

Of course, none of this helps you now, so there are some things that you should try. First, have you got ADSL filters plugged into every phone socket in your home? If you haven't, you'll suffer problems. If you have, try unplugging all your phones and then test your broadband speed.

If the problem is intermittent, at what times does it occur? If it happens at regular times, then it is likely to be high network traffic causing the problem. If you've got a friend with a USB modem or router that you can borrow, try your connection with one of these. You may find that the problem is with your modem or router, not the line.

Finally, you can phone BT and ask to have the gain turned up on your telephone line. This can help improve reception and, hopefully, increase your broadband speeds. Also, ask for a line check, to make sure that there aren't any problems with your telephone line.

If none of this works, then you could just tell Virgin Media that you've tested your connection and it's dropped below the 400Kbit/s limit that it has set, and force some investigation. Otherwise, switching to a different ISP might be your best bet. If you do this and you still get a slow connection then you know that the problem is with your connection, not the ISP. 

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